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SUMMARY RECORD OF THE 8th MEETING

Chairman: Mr. KALPAGE (Sri Lanka)

CONTENTS

AGENDA ITEM 88: QUESTIONS RELATING TO INFORMATION

ORGANIZATION OF WORK

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The meeting was called to order at 3.10 p.m.

AGENDA ITEM 88: QUESTIONS RELATING TO INFORMATION (A/48/21 and A/48/407)

1. Mr. VIANELLO-CHIODO (Assistant Secretary-General for Public Information) said that it was now a challenging time for the United Nations, given its efforts to expand its activities and the new role it was expected to play in the international arena. President John F. Kennedy had stated that the United Nations was the last, best hope for mankind and that it would be necessary to create a new organization just like it, if it ceased to exist. However, it seemed difficult today to define what the world could or should expect from the world Organization. Member States viewed the United Nations not only as the principal forum for multinational dialogue, but also, as a unique instrument capable of mobilizing the international community with respect to conflict settlement, the cessation of armed conflict, the monitoring of democratic elections, the delivery of humanitarian relief, the protection of human rights, the preservation of the environment, and the advancement of social development and sustainable economic development, to name just a few of the priority issues on the agenda of the United Nations.

2. The United Nations was increasingly being called upon to provide aid on short notice; the demands on it were greater than its resources, and its shortcomings were glaringly highlighted. As a result, public support for the Organization was lacking at times in certain critical areas. However, what the Secretary-General described as the "chorus of demands to do something" showed that the time had come to match the entire world's expectations with the political will and the means to accomplish the tasks facing the Organization. The Department of Public Information must tackle that task to the best of its ability. That was particularly true at a time when the information revolution had turned communication - and thus, the media - into a new power which formed political realities by moulding public opinion. In meeting that challenge, the Department's strategy was to make its information programme more open than in recent decades and to strengthen advocacy on behalf of the United Nations. It was necessary to sustain the public's interest in the Organization and its activities and enhance its understanding of the responsibilities of the world body. Information programmes must be designed to seize every opportunity to shine the spotlight of world attention on the work which must be accomplished together to advance the cause of humanity. Communication must lead to a fruitful dialogue, which meant that information strategies should focus more on "communication" than on "supply". While the foundation of its activities would continue to be print, audio-visual, television and radio coverage of the activities of the United Nations, the Department of Public Information must at the same time redirect its efforts to gain public support for the Organization and its new responsibilities.

3. As was clear from the report of the Secretary-General on questions relating to information (A/48/407), the Department of Public Information had made every effort to discharge the mandates entrusted to it by the General Assembly. Nevertheless, financial, administrative and bureaucratic constraints made that task extremely difficult. Far from being a luxury, flexibility was a prerequisite if the Department was to be able to respond rapidly to fast-breaking developments and, when necessary, to unwarranted criticism by some

(Mr. Vianello-Chiodo)

in the media. Upon joining the Department, one of his first challenges had been to discuss with the members of the Bureau and the enlarged Bureau of the Committee on Information how to restructure the Department and rethink its methods of work. The dissemination of information about the United Nations could not be separated from the necessary advocacy with the public, and the Department had adopted a more active approach in advocating the ideals and principles upon which the United Nations had been founded. It must take advantage of the excellent opportunities now available to breathe new life into them.

4. The Department of Public Information now comprised the Office of the Assistant Secretary-General and four divisions, namely, the Office of the Spokesman for the General Assembly, the Media Division, the Library and Publications Division and the Promotion and External Relations Division. The Department had absorbed the Dag Hammarskjöld Library and some parts of the former Publishing Division. Despite its added responsibilities, the Department had been able to streamline its structure, eliminate one D-2 post and reduce its staff by some 15 posts compared to the number envisaged at the start of the current biennium. The post of the head of the Department had been downgraded and was now at the Assistant Secretary-General level.

5. The Office of the Spokesman for the Secretary-General was now responsible for the news distribution services provided to senior Secretariat officials, in addition to its traditional functions of providing daily briefings to delegations and the media and providing information support to the Secretary-General. In addition to providing print and audio-visual coverage (press release, photographic, radio, television and film coverage and updates), the Media Division had absorbed the responsibility of providing media liaison and accreditation services. In addition to weekly television broadcasts, a new electronic bulletin board service had been created in September 1993 which enabled radio stations to receive over the telephone such information as the daily briefings by the Spokesman for the Secretary-General, updates, statements and special reports. Users had expressed considerable satisfaction with the new service. The Library and Publications Division encompassed the library and publishing services transferred from the Office of Conference Services as well as the services responsible for the publication of the Yearbook of the United Nations, the UN Chronicle and Development Business. The transfer to the Division of certain publishing and research activities had proved beneficial for programme delivery. The 1988 and 1992 editions of the Yearbook of the United Nations would be issued by the end of 1993. The entire backlog would be cleared by 1995. Consideration was being given to improving the UN Chronicle and resuming publication of Development Forum.

6. As part of its mandate to maximize the dissemination of United Nations information throughout the world the Dag Hammarskjöld Library was continuing to strengthen its system of depository libraries by designating new ones in new Member States. The library was also engaged in promoting cooperation between the libraries of the United Nations common system and establishing policies to that end. It was planning to set up a separate branch library to serve the Departments of Political Affairs and Peace-keeping Operations because the information provided by its legal and statistical service was extremely useful

(Mr. Vianello-Chiodo)

and there was a growing need to establish closer ties between those services and the Departments concerned.

7. As for strengthening the Publications Board as envisaged in General Assembly resolution 47/73 B, he had commissioned a report from an expert on publishing in the United Nations system (the Mandl Report). The report, which had been submitted in May 1993, contained a number of excellent suggestions which had been discussed in the Department. The Working Committee of the Publications Board had adopted the suggestions in principle. Their implementation together with the guidance the General Assembly would give on the report of the Secretary-General on the activities of the Publications Board relating to the elaboration of the United Nations publications policy (A/AC.198/1993/4) would help strengthen the role of the Publications Board and consequently the publications programme.

8. The fourth Division was the Promotion and External Relations Division which was responsible for developing advocacy policies, producing thematic information material in conjunction with substantive departments and other United Nations organizations, disseminating and exploiting information, liaising with non-governmental organizations, managing services for the public, organizing special events and directing United Nations information centres. During the preceding year the Division had carried out, in conformity with General Assembly resolution 47/73 B, information programmes on the following priority areas: peace-keeping, peacemaking, disarmament and conflict resolution, human rights - in particular in the context of the World Conference on Human Rights and the International Year for the World's Indigenous People - the anti-apartheid struggle, sustainable development, the information programme on Palestine, women's issues and information on Africa. The publication Africa Recovery had, for the second time, won the prestigious World Hunger Media Award. In 1993, the Division had produced a new edition of Basic Facts about the United Nations, a special edition of Notes for speakers on human rights and it was in the process of preparing a new booklet ("Answering Hostile Questions") intended to respond to some of the many unjustified criticisms made of the United Nations.

9. The NGO/Department of Public Information Annual Conference, in which more than 1,300 representatives of non-governmental organizations had participated, had dealt with social development as a new definition of security. The Promotion and External Relations Division had also organized the annual training programme for press, radio and television journalists from developing countries and for the first time a training programme for young diplomats which had previously been the responsibility of the United Nations Institute for Training and Research. The main innovation had been the creation within the Division of a new Planning and Promotion Service which would be a focal point to enhance planning for major conferences and related information strategies, outreach programmes and coverage requirements.

10. In attempting to reach a wider public the Department had offered its services to publicly accessible databases (GEMNET, Federal News Service and Agorá) whilst keeping up the arrangements with Reuters. Provisions had been made to ensure the timely dissemination of information bulletins on significant events, press briefings and other information in English and French.

(Mr. Vianello-Chiodo)

11. With regard to United Nations information centres, a new centre would be set up in Sana'a, Yemen, and the Tehran centre, Islamic Republic of Iran, would be reopened. The capacity of centres in Bujumbura, Dar-es-Salaam and Dhaka would be enhanced. In accordance with the wishes of the Secretary-General and the German authorities a new information centre would be set up in Bonn in January 1994 with the financial support of the host Government. The three new United Nations information centres could be staffed through the redeployment of existing posts. The Department was also trying to fill the vacant Director posts in Copenhagen, Harare, Lusaka, Manila, Mexico, Nairobi and Sydney. Action had been taken to evaluate the current integration of certain information centres with United Nations Development Programme field offices. Increased support had been requested from some host Governments for centres in their countries and negotiations were under way in Washington and London with a view to obtaining more favourable terms for rental paid for office premises.

12. Since the Division was responsible not only for producing and disseminating information, but also for carrying out activities to exploit information and supervising information centres, it was better able to respond to the needs of its various audiences, be they the media, the general public, non-governmental organizations, United Nations associations or educational institutions which ensured the redissemination of information. The Division had also taken the initiative of systematically working with parliamentarians at the national level and in international forums. The Office of the Assistant Secretary-General for Information had also undertaken to evaluate more systematically a series of activities of the Department of Public Information, which was an essential task.

13. Because of the recent decision to suspend guided tours, Headquarters could no longer be as open to the public. That decision would also prevent the Dag Hammarskjöld library from becoming a cultural centre as had been hoped. The Department would like to hear the views of the Committee on Information on how satisfactory arrangements could be devised to maintain both the security of the Headquarters building and the public's access to it.

14. Financial difficulties meant that choices must be made among multiplying priorities. The meetings planned for 1994 (the International Conference on Population and Development) and 1995 (the World Summit for Social Development, the fourth World Conference on Women, the United Nations Congress on the Prevention of Crime and the Treatment of Offenders and the celebration of the fiftieth anniversary of the United Nations) all constituted challenges which, with the support of the Committee on Information, the Department would be able to meet. The Department of Public Information's programme of work and proposed programme budget for the biennium 1994-1995 (A/48/6 (sect. 24)) were in accordance with the Committee's recommendations as set forth in document A/48/21.

15. The time had come to end the inactivity in which the United Nations had been frozen since the cold war. It must be freed from that spiritual paralysis and an effort must be made to breathe new life into the vision which had guided the founders of the Organization 48 years before.

16. Mr. KONIK (Poland), Acting Chairman of the Bureau of the Committee on Information, introduced the Committee's report (A/48/21). The Committee had

(Mr. Konik, Poland)

decided, again by consensus, to recommend that the General Assembly should adopt draft resolution A, on information in the service of humanity, and draft resolution B, on United Nations public information policies and activities, contained in part IV of the report. The draft resolutions reflected the consensus reached by the Committee on the importance of the principles of freedom of the press and freedom of information, and of independence, pluralism and diversity in the media. The Committee recommended strengthening bilateral and multilateral cooperation in order to improve the system of information and communication in developing countries and called on the General Assembly to provide full support for the UNESCO International Programme for the Development of Communication. Draft resolution B sketched out the general framework for the future activities of the Department of Public Information.

17. At its fifteenth session, the Committee had continued its discussions of means of strengthening further the network of United Nations Information Centres and services, which were called upon to respond to an ever-increasing number of questions about the Organization's activities. The Committee had made clear and specific recommendations regarding the work of the Department. It had also decided, in view of the growing interest in its work, to recommend that the General Assembly should increase the Committee's membership from 80 to 83 and should accept the candidacies of Gabon and Israel.

18. He wished to express the Committee's gratitude to the Assistant Secretary-General for Information and to the Department of Public Information for their invariably cooperative attitude and for their untiring efforts to respond to requests for information. He also wished to thank the Chairman of the Committee, Mr. Mansoor Suhail, of Pakistan, and the other members of the Bureau for their efforts to bring about consensus within the Committee. He also thanked the representatives of the regional groups, the Group of 77 and China. He paid a tribute to the former Secretary of the Committee on Information, Mr. Masha, and welcomed its new Secretary, Mr. Gerhard Haensel.

19. Mr. LOPEZ OSPINA (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) recalled that, in 1989, UNESCO had adopted a new communication strategy aimed at encouraging the free flow of information, promoting its wider and better-balanced dissemination, and developing appropriate means of strengthening communication capacities in the developing countries. In order to implement the new strategy, a series of seminars had been organized, in cooperation with the United Nations Department of Public Information, with a view to promoting the development of a free and pluralistic press. The first seminar, held in the spring of 1991 at Windhoek (Namibia), had culminated in the adoption of the Declaration of Windhoek, currently recognized as a reference text by media professionals from all countries. At its twenty-sixth General Conference, UNESCO, which had endorsed the Declaration of Windhoek, had called for the establishment of 3 May as World Press Freedom Day, and the proposal had been approved in July 1993 by the Economic and Social Council. A second seminar had been held in October 1992 at Alma Alta, and UNESCO was currently preparing, with the Department of Public Information and UNDP, a third regional seminar to be held in Santiago, Chile, aimed at evaluating media trends in the region, identifying ways and means of fostering press freedom and developing independent and pluralistic media, while at the same time encouraging disadvantaged populations to participate in the processes of development and democratization

(Mr. Lopez Ospina, UNESCO)

by setting up their own media at the grass-roots level. The participants in the seminar would seek to identify projects likely to meet those goals. Another major component of the new information strategy was the Intergovernmental Programme for the Development of Communication which, at its recent fourteenth session, had approved some 50 new communication development projects at the international, regional and national levels. Funding for those projects from voluntary contributions totalled about 2.2 million dollars. That amount, however, would meet only 25 per cent of the needs of all those projects and the balance would have to be raised from bilateral sources. Currently, the Programme's special account had total funding of 3 million dollars. UNESCO hoped that at the twenty-seventh General Conference, which had just opened, contributions from Member States would make it possible to increase the funding of the special account to 6 million dollars for the 1994-1995 biennium.

20. UNESCO was still unwavering in its commitment to promote the free flow of information and its wider dissemination. It was concerned at the apparent disinclination of the industrialized countries to fund efforts to develop communication in the developing countries, at a time when an increasing number of the projects proposed in that area concerned countries that were undergoing democratization.

ORGANIZATION OF WORK (A/C.4/48/L.1)

21. The CHAIRMAN announced that, after consultations with Conference Services, the Committee had been allocated four additional meetings. He proposed, therefore, that item 84 should be taken up from 8 to 11 November, item 85 from 15 to 19 November, item 86 at four meetings on 22 and 23 November and item 87 at four meetings on 24 and 26 November. The timetable for the organization of work (A/C.4/48/L.1) should be amended accordingly.

22. It was so decided.

The meeting rose at 4.10 p.m.